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Puddleglum: The Figure of the Comic Hero in C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*

BY MARK T. IRWIN

C.S. Lewis, Chronicles of Narnia have, in the last fifteen years or so, achieved an almost cultic status up and down the ranks of American Christendom. And either preceding or, as one suspects, following on the coat-tails of the popularity, a sizeable body of critical and more noticeably popcritical work on these "children's" books has developed. For the most part these works have included the Narnia series within a larger consideration of Lewis' fiction, although of late a number of studies have appeared which concentrate solely on various aspects within and among the seven books.¹

What I would like to do, in a necessarily brief fashion, is a reading of the sixth book of the series, *The Silver Chair*,² from the standpoint that character rather than theme is of chief importance. For character is something which children are able to grasp intuitively and make judgements upon, whereas theme, while also of importance, is something which must wait for the development of the intellect, and can therefore be of only secondary importance in a work written first of all for children.

This study intends to show that a proper understanding of *The Silver Chair*³ may be found through the comic figure of Puddleglum, who provides us with a healthy restoration from sentimentalism on the one side and nihilistic despair on the other. Considered in the light of Christian apologetics, we may find that *SC* comes closer than any other work of Lewis'—fiction or nonfiction—to dealing with nihilism, which indeed forms the climax of the book.⁴

It is best to inform the reader at the outset which level of meaning one intends to approach in the reading of a given work: literal, moral, allegorical, or anagogical. For the purposes of this paper, we must arrive somewhere between the allegorical and the anagogical, i.e., a spiritual level which may be labeled mythopoeic. As Chad Walsh wrote, Lewis knew "no words as adequate to God.... Only the language of poetry—the metaphor, the myth—can properly hint at the literally unsayable."⁵ As to the "best" way to read *SC* or any of the Narnia tales, I find myself in general agreement with Walter Hooper, and refer the reader to Hooper's *Past Watchful Dragons*.

The argument that Puddleglum carries central importance for understanding the book is, to my knowledge, unique to this study.⁶ But as I implied earlier, very little consideration has been given to the Narnia books as separate entities. The general consensus, insofar as we find Puddleglum mentioned at all, is that he is either a skeptic or a "complete pessimist."⁷ I think he is neither, but instead stands as an embodiment of the comic vision—he is the comic hero.

The comic hero is one with whom we may or may not find ourselves in sympathy or admiration, but who continually reminds us of our finitude and physical condition. He prevents us from becoming obsessed with a way of looking at reality that is anything less than holistic, e.g., from a sentimental perspective, or an intellectual one, or a "spiritual" one, or any way which causes us to lose sight of our finitude. The purpose of the comic vision is twofold: first, to restore our confidence in the physical world, and second, to restore a sense that the events of our lives lead us to what is ultimately significant in life.

The idea of the comic as just defined is in accord with Christianity on two crucial points: the doctrines of Creation and Incarnation. The comic vision is in harmony with the Christian doctrine of Creation because the world, for the Christian, is essentially good (despite its sinfulness) because God made it. The comic vision is in agreement with the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation because God has affirmed the image of his creature and his Creation by entering into it himself.⁸

That Lewis based Puddleglum on his gardener seems now to be a fact in the public domain. What might not be of quite such general knowledge is the probable source of the name itself, which is John Studley's sixteenth-century vernacular translation of *Tacitae Stygis* in Hippolytus—"Stygian puddle glum."¹⁰ The name "Puddleglum" is indicative to me of the comic nature of the character; it is strongly suggestive of a clown's name. And there are three basic types of clowns: the one who is happy and silly, the one who is sad and melancholy, and the one who is somehow both—Puddleglum.

As a Marsh-wiggle, Puddleglum confesses to his comic nature both by what he is and what he says. He is a creature of the earth, "nearly the same colour as the marsh..." His hands and feet are webbed like a frog's, and his tobacco—"some people say they mix it with mud"—is a symbolic mixture of Man's mortality, of his spiritual (smoke) and earthly (mud) natures.¹¹

The guise of Puddleglum's pessimistic speech and mannerisms has led many to label him prematurely as a skeptic or pessimist. But the way in which Puddleglum uses his "pessimism" is actually neither skeptical nor pessimistic in its outcome, but comic. This in itself should in

dicating that Puddleglum's "doom-and-gloom" manner is no more than a comic facade, and one which has the effect of endearing him to the reader. Puddleglum's own assessment of his personality sheds light on his comic nature; "I'm a chap who always likes to know the worst and then put the best face on it I can." And his "best face" is that of a clown: "...there's one good thing about being trapped down here: It'll save funeral expenses." "And there's one good thing about this underground work, we shan't get any rain."¹²

There is a firm foundation of optimism beneath Puddleglum's pessimistic facade which provides the irony and humor which endear him to us. His opinion that he doesn't take life in a sober enough fashion—"They all say...that I'm too flighty; don't take life seriously enough"—lends his attempts at being gay the air of slapstick and graveyard humor.¹³ His pessimistic facade is of such a cheery nature that one is forced to speculate that there must be something about life which gives him grounds for his inverted optimism. And indeed there is: his faith in Aslan. Puddleglum's faith rests on three tenets. First, discipline—"Aslan's instructions always work: there are no exceptions." Second, his conviction that "There *are* no accidents. Our guide is Aslan."¹⁴ And third, "the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones," in other words a Platonic notion of essence preceding existence.¹⁵

This optimism also defines in Puddleglum (barring the comic vehicle of his gloomy mannerisms) another important ingredient in the comic vision, namely, the ability to perceive reality correctly. In the case of *SC*, this means avoiding the pitfalls of a sentimentalism that excludes the radical nature of evil on the one hand, and of the view that life holds no ultimate significance—nihilism—on the other. In both cases, it is Puddleglum who provides the restorative, as we shall see.

Jill Pole stands as the character who most readily embodies sentimentalism. Time and again Pole is overcome by sentimentalism which either ignores or excludes the radical reality of evil. At the beginning of their journey to the City Ruinous, when things are still running smoothly, Jill exclaims that "she might enjoy adventures after all," and it is Puddleglum who reminds her that an "adventure" implies danger and risks, which they have yet to encounter. It is his perception of the true nature of reality that leads him to doubt the good intentions of the Lady of the Green Kirtle, whose breathtaking beauty and courteous manner almost cause Jill to blurt out their mission.¹⁶

When the children and Puddleglum are captured by the Earthmen in Underworld, the Marsh-wiggle once again shows his understanding of the true nature of reality, for while Eustace and Jill pass from sentimentalism to the beginnings of existential despair, Puddleglum says "Now don't let your spirits down, Pole.... We're back on the right

lines.... We're following the instructions [of Aslan] again."¹⁷ Here in Underworld, amid the nihilism of the Queen-Witch and the Earthmen, Puddleglum's true nature shines out more clearly than in the beauty and goodness of Narnia, and the children change their former opinion of him as a "wet blanket" to a source of comfort. Although the scope of this paper precludes the possibility of an in-depth treatment of nihilism in *SC* one can easily discern it in the Earthmen's loss of community, loss of the historical sense, and total despair prior to their release from the Witch's spell, as well as in other images and symbols throughout the book.

But the height of Puddleglum's comic heroism and understanding of the true nature of reality comes at the theological and emotional climax of the book, where the Witch has practically completed her enchantment of the children, the Prince, and Puddleglum, convincing them that there is no Narnia, no Overworld, and no Aslan.¹⁸ At this crucial moment Puddleglum literally sticks his foot in the fire (the source of an enchanting smoke), and the resultant pain clears his thoughts, allowing him to make a brilliant defense against the Witch's nihilistic world:

Suppose we *have* only dreamed or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself.... Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one...four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it.¹⁹

One may be reminded of a Kirkegaardian "leap of faith" or the Pascalian "wager" on the existence of God, but here there is the crucial difference that the absurdity of existence, once faith is reaffirmed, disappears, and is replaced by a cosmos where harmony and reason are restored. Backed up against the wall of nihilistic despair, Puddleglum is able to reaffirm his faith, and by affirming it come again to affirm that understanding of reality which has been temporarily destroyed by the Witch. From this point forward the battle is won, and the rest of the book forms the outcome of his action deep within the castle and Underworld of the Queen-Witch,

Lewis tells us in his "Preface" to the MacDonald anthology that he had read Kafka and, by way of conclusion, one wonders if Chapter XI of *SC* "In the Dark Castle," might in some way be a reaction against the despair of Kafka's world of *The Castle* and *The Trial*. Probably not, but still it is interesting that both "castles" are fraught with the problem of nihilism.

Notes

¹A fair picture of the critical works concerning Narnia is available through the Christopher and Ostling book, *C.S. Lewis: An Annotated Checklist of Writings* (Kent State University Press, n.d., c. 1973), pp. 99-116, 218-220. One might also add significant books which have appeared since 1972: Walter Hooper's *Past Watchful Dragons* (New York: Collier Books, 1979); Martha C. Sammons' pseudo-critical *A Guide Through Narnia* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1979); Peter J. Schakel's superb *Reading With the Heart: The Way into Narnia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); and most recently, Paul F. Ford's delightful *Companion to Narnia* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

²I.e., the fourth book published, but chronologically sixth in the series; cf. Kathryn Lindskoog, *The Lion of Judah in Never-Never Land* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 26.

³Hereafter abbreviated as SC; page references are from the Collier paperback edition (New York, 1970).

⁴The closest non-fiction apologetic I have run across was an essay Lewis originally gave for the legendary Socratic Club, "On the Obstinacy in Belief," in *The World's Last Night* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 13-30. This essay was written at approximately the same time as SC, but at least to me it bears closer affinities to *The Last Battle*, also written at about that time.

⁵Chad Walsh, "Forward," in William L. White's *The Image of Man in C.S. Lewis* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 8.

⁶However, Peter S. Schakel has done an excellent thematic study of SC in "You must use the map: Sign and Scripture in The Silver Chair," in his *Reading With the Heart*, p. 35-64.

⁷Paul F. Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, p. 234. This view also prevails in all the other mentionings of Puddleglum I have run across (see note 1).

⁸I am indebted in my argument concerning the nature of the comic and its affinities to Christianity to Nathan A. Scott, Jr.'s "The Bias of Comecy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," in *The Broken Center* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 77-118.

⁹Yet for those who wish more detail, see *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), pp. 122-123.

¹⁰C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)* (Oxford University Press, 1954), Bk. II, p. 256. Hooper points this out in *Dragons*, p. 108, but remarkably fails to give us either the Latin or Studley's translation of it.

¹¹SC, pp. 58-60.

¹²SC, pp. 159, 187, 124.

¹³SC, pp. 64, 106-107, 78.

¹⁴Cf. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), p. 126.

¹⁵SC, pp. 104, 134, 159.

¹⁶SC, pp. 68, 74-77.

¹⁷SC, p. 128.

¹⁸SC, pp. 151-157.

¹⁹SC, p. 159.